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Recreational Boat Marine Casualties: Lessons Learned

The following are summaries of various Marine Casualties (accidents) investigated by Marine Safety Office Tampa involving recreational boats. These are actual occurrences that have taken place in the Tampa Bay vicinity within the last two years. The details of the incidents have been purposefully left out to protect the privacy of those involved. Our intent is to illustrate lessons learned from these marine casualties in a hope that mariners and recreational boaters can apply them to prevent the reoccurrence of similar accidents.

It is highly recommended that the readers of these summaries continue to broaden their Recreational and Boating Safety knowledge through the various means available. Boaters should take advantage of the many Boating Safety classes conducted by the Coast Guard Auxiliary and Power Squadrons. The U.S. Coast Guard Office of Boating Safety web page (uscgboating.org) is a good resource for information. It is also recommended that a recreational boater utilize navigation and boating textbooks found in any good bookstore. All boaters should become familiar with the Navigational Rules of the Road. The U.S. Coast Guard publishes these rules in COMDTINST M16672.2D, which can be purchased from the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) or nautical bookstores located in many cities. To contact a local GPO sales agent, call (202) 512-1800 or check your local telephone directory. This book may also be ordered directly from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402.

Although recreational boating is a fun and entertaining activity, every boater should be mindful that the maritime environment can be extremely hazardous when proper boating safety precautions and practices are not followed.

(1) "Beer Can Island" Wake Incident:

A large Freight Vessel's wake causes damage to an anchored recreational boat and seriously injures a person sunbathing on "Beer Can Island", Tampa Bay, Florida.

On a pleasant weekend afternoon, a number of recreational boaters anchored their vessels in the vicinity of "Beer Can" Island, a spoil island located at the southern end of Hillsborough Bay, southeast of the junction of Gadsden Point Cut and Big Bend Channel in Tampa Bay, Florida. Local recreational boats often frequent this island because of its popularity as a picnic and swimming area. Unfortunately, it's also located within half a mile from a busy deep-draft shipping channel serving the large commercial vessels. As these large vessels transit the channel, they create a large wake from the huge amount of water that is displaced by the vessel's hull. These wakes in the vicinity of the vessels may appear small, but as they move into shallow

waters and onto the shore, the wake increases in size, sometimes reaching heights of over five feet. On this day, the anchored recreational boats and people picnicking on “Beer Can Island” were in for a very unpleasant surprise. Thinking that a passing Tank Vessel’s wake was not much to worry about, they soon realized its dangers. The wake grew in size, large enough to carry an anchored recreational boat 100 feet up onto the Island. The boat was pounded onto the rocky shoreline resulting in over \$20,000 of damage. Worse yet, a sunbather was tossed by the incoming wake onto the rocky shoreline. This resulted in the sunbather breaking their jaw and receiving numerous stitches from lacerations to the face.

Lesson Learned: Recreational boaters should use caution when anchoring in the vicinity of a commercial deep-draft shipping channel. The recreational boater should consider the effects of any resulting wake left from a passing deep-draft vessel. It is best to anchor your boat on the side of any island that is sheltered from a deep-draft vessel’s wake.

(2) Recreational Boat dragged by passing Tug and Barge:

A small recreational vessel anchored next to a deep-draft shipping channel is dragged a few hundred yards by a passing barge in tow.

One pleasant day in Tampa Bay, two men decided to go fishing on their small recreational boat. Thinking that the fish would be in deeper water, they anchored their boat on the edge of a commercial shipping channel. Shortly after, they noticed a tug and barge was meeting a large tank vessel in the channel at the vicinity of where they were anchored. In order to make room for the meeting tanker, the tug and barge moved to their side of the channel, which placed it closer to the recreational boat. As the tug and barge approached the anchored recreational boat, the two men realized that the tug and barge was on a collision course with their boat. They then started their outboard engine and attempted to retrieve their anchor line. Luckily, the passing tug and barge missed them. However, they were not out of danger yet. As the barge passed by, its tow wires that were trailing in the water became entangled with the recreational boat’s anchor line. This caused the recreational boat to be dragged by the barge for a distance of nearly 200 yards. Their recreational boat was nearly swamped in the process. Eventually, the tow wires freed themselves from the anchor line, thus saving the vessel from possibly sinking and causing its occupants to enter into the water. Luckily, the two men did not receive injuries and were able to take their boat safely back to their dock.

Lesson Learned: Recreational boaters should be cautious of where they anchor their vessels, especially when anchoring in the vicinity of a commercial deep-draft shipping channel. They should understand that deep-draft commercial vessels are typically restricted by their draft and must stay in the confines of the channel. Furthermore, a large vessel’s ability to maneuver is restricted and cannot react quickly to a smaller boat in its path. Operating your boat in close proximity to a large commercial vessel can be hazardous and should be avoided.

(3) Tug and Barge collides with a sailing vessel in the Gulf of Mexico

A recreational sailing vessel operator’s unfamiliarity with Navigational Rules of the Road and Vessel Navigation Lights contribute to the vessel’s collision with a underway tug and barge in the Gulf of Mexico during a crossing situation. .

While transiting in the Gulf of Mexico in the early morning hours, a recreational sailing vessel's operator noticed a vessel's navigational lights in the distance. The sailing vessel itself had illuminated the required navigation lights for a sailing vessel under 20 meters (that being port and starboard running lights at the bow and a stern light). Not knowing exactly what the light arrangement on the other vessel stood for, the operator continued his transit with no further thought. As time went on, the operator discovered that the lights were getting closer to his vessel. He still continued on his course. It was not until the two vessels were within a few hundred yards from each other and on a near collision course did the sailing vessel operator realize that the navigation lights were from a large tug and barge. The sailing vessel operator made no attempt to contact the approaching tug via radio to make a meeting arrangement or at the very least, alert the tug to its presence. By the time the sailor decided to change his course to avoid a collision, it was too late. The sailing vessel barely made it across the path of the tug and barge. However, the barge's wake forced the sailing vessel towards its hull, resulting in the two vessels striking several times. The sailing vessel received structural damage to its main hull and water tank. Luckily, it did not receive any major damage that would cause the vessel to sink. One of the crewmembers onboard the sailing vessel received minor injury.

Lesson Learned: Recreational boaters should know Navigational Rules of the Road and understand Navigational Light arrangements. In this case, if the sailing vessel operator understood these rules, he would have realized his vessel was on a collision course with the approaching tug and barge. In addition, the sailing vessel operator failed to use a marine radio to contact the tug and barge to notify them of their presence and to make a passing agreement. Just because a mariner sees the lights of another vessel does not always mean the other vessel has visual contact with them. A simple call on the radio will confirm this. It is also recommended that sailing vessels less than 20 meters in length display the optional sailing navigation lights (a red over green light on the top of the mast) in addition to the required lights on the main deck. This will increase the chances of a sailing vessel being seen at greater distances. It is all advised that recreational boat, especially sailing vessels, are equipped with a radar reflector that is displayed high up in the rigging.

(4) Recreational boat collides with a large passenger boat while underway in the Gulf of Mexico during conditions of reduced visibility (fog).

On a winter's day, three people boarded their recreational boat for a day of fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. Although the weather conditions seemed clear onshore, the visibility conditions offshore were greatly reduced by fog. Being overconfident that there would be no other vessel-traffic in the area, the recreational boat continued their voyage into the Gulf of Mexico with no regard to the proper procedures of operating a vessel in such restricted visibility conditions. According to the Navigational Rules of the Road, a vessel operating in reduced visibility, such as fog, must reduce speed so as to properly assess the presence of any vessel traffic through all available means, including radar, sight, and hearing. In addition, a vessel must sound fog signals so as to alert any nearby vessels of their presence. Unfortunately, the recreational boat continued with high speed through the fog and only noticed too late that they were on a collision course with a large passenger vessel. Unable to react in time, the recreational boat collided with the other vessel. The impact resulted in the death of one of the recreational boat riders and serious injuries to the other two.

Lesson Learned: Recreational boaters should adhere to the Navigational Rules of the Road at all times. This is especially true during the operation of a vessel in conditions of reduced visibility. Mariners should use all appropriate means to detect the presence of other vessels and determine if there is a risk of collision. Use of marine radio communications, radar, sound and lights signals should all be utilized.

(5) Recreational boat explodes at the dock with one person sustaining serious injury.

Two men were preparing to go fishing on their recreational boat for a day of fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. As they started the boat's outboard engine, an explosion occurred in the vessels bilges. The explosion was strong enough to blow out the center consol and a large section of the boat's inner liner. The person who was on board sustained a serious leg injury, which later required amputation. According to the boat's owner, the previous owner made modifications that were not in accordance with the boat manufacturer's specifications. The boat's gasoline fuel tank compartment was modified to make more room for the fishing deck. This modification also included placing the boat's battery in the same enclosed compartment with the fuel tank. As a result, gasoline vapors collected in that space and ignited from an electrical short from the batteries.

Lessons Learned: Recreational boat owners/ operators should only make modifications to their boats that are in accordance with manufacturers guidelines and good marine practice. Additionally, due to the volatile nature of gasoline, recreational boat owners should ensure that any space containing such a fuel is properly ventilated at all times and any ignition source, such as electrical systems, are removed.

We encourage your comments and solicit any additional experiences that we might share that may help prevent future accidents. You may contact my Marine Investigation Department staff at (813) 228-2193 x150 or email LT Scott Muller at smuller@msotampa.uscg.mil.

Sincerely,

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